DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 895 TM 870 474

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TITLE Improving Chapter 1 through Parents: A Family Goal Program.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, DC, April 20-24, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; Childhood Attitudes; *Compensatory Education; Elementary Education; Home Study; Improvement Programs; Longitudinal Studies; Parent Attitudes; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Education Consolidation Improvement Act Chapter 1

ABSTRACT

The impact of a parent-school partnership program on elementary school children's reading achievement and attitudes is being evaluated over five years. The program involves the parents in children's reading activities and allows them to influence their children's attitudes toward school achievement. Participating parents agree to support seven family goals to enhance reading and to keep a log of activities and progress. In six experimental and six comparison schools, reading achievement gains were assessed using the Metropolitan Achievement Test, the family log, a reading inventory, and a parent survey. Achievement gains were above national averages in all schools, with experimental schools slightly favored. Parents in both groups reported similar patterns of helping their children and similar perceptions of improved attitudes on the childrens' part. Over half the students said they liked to read; a fifth felt stories they read in school were too long or difficult. Strong positive correlations were found between improved reading, setting aside a specific time for study, and parental help with homework. Most of the parents (76%) considered the program to be a happy one; only about half felt it was easy. (MGD)

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Improving Chapter 1 Through Parents: A Family Goal Program

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C., April 20-24, 1987.

TM 870 474

Abstract

This study describes an easily transportable and affordable parent involvement component in compensatory education. The program promotes an active parent-school partnership in which parents set family goals and engage in helping activities designed to enhance their children's reading performance. A longitudinal quasi-experimental investigation is being conducted on the program to assess its effects on student reading achievement and attitudes. The first-year results revealed a student achievement pattern generally favorable to the program and identified certain parent activities that are particularly effective in promoting high student achievement in reading. The information is used to further strengthen this unique parent involvement effort.

Improving Chapter 1 Through Parents: A Family Goal Program

INTRODUCTION

It is generally recognized that compensatory education programs are among the most difficult to implement (Bissell, 1978; Yap, 1984; Yap, 1986). One of the primary reasons is undoubtedly the requirement of parent involvement. For many programs, it is difficult enough to accomplish parent consultation (often a federal requirement) in the most perfunctory manner, leave alone making such involvement meaningful and effective in fostering student achievement.

Many researchers have suggested that parents can help most effectively in providing home reinforcement of school learning by supplementing school work at home, monitoring and encouraging their children's learning (Armor et al., 1976; Brandt, 1979; Weilby, 1979; Melargno et al., 1981; Sinclair, 1981; Walberg, 1984). However, this aspect of parent involvement is seldom emphasized in Chapter 1 projects. Even though parent and community involvement was recognized as one of primary attributes most responsible for program impact, a recent Chapter 1 study (Griswold et al., 1986) identified the least popular parent involvement activities to be monitoring homework, providing input on homework and stimulating discussions at home. Much more popular were parent committees, parent-teacher meetings and workshops on parent involvement.

The common parent involvement activities are only tangentially, if at all, related to children's cognitive development and school achievement. It is not surprising that the impact of parent involvement on children's school achievemet has largely been unclear (Paddock, 1979; Fullan, 1982). Quite often one hears contrasting opinions of Chapter 1 teachers about the benefits

of parent involvement. Although many teachers believe that parent involvement is important, they are either uncomfortable developing such programs or are skeptical of their success (Epstein and Becker, 1982).

Yet, intuitively, there seems little doubt that parents play a critical role in their children's cognitive development and school achievement (Scott-Jones, 1984). There is, in fact, some evidence that parent involvement contributes to school success (Edmonds, 1979; Walberg, 1984). Most educators, particularly those in compensatory education, believe that an effective school-home partnership will foster student achievement.

THE FAMILY GOAL PROGRAM

Acting on the belief that parents can play a critical role in fostering their children's school achievement, the Big Island School District in Hawaii has developed a unique parent involvement component in its Chapter 1 program to increase parent participation in the learning process. The objectives of the program are:

1. to involve parents in their children's reading activities;
2. to demonstrate that active parent involvement contributes to school success; and
3. to allow parents to be influential in the formation of their children's positive attitudes toward school achievement.

To ensure active participation in the learning process, each Chapter 1 parent enters into an agreement with the district to set a family goal and to engage in activities designed to achieve that goal. Sample family goals include:

- Set aside a quiet place for our child to study and to do home work
- Take our child to the library regularly
- Read to our child
- Talk to our child about books read
- Turn off the TV at a specified time each day so the family can read together
- Ask the Chapter 1 teacher how we can help our child
- Get more books for our home

A family goal log is provided for parents to keep track of activities and progress. The log is forwarded to the Chapter 1 teachers for examination and recordkeeping on a regular basis.

THE STUDY

Design

To assess the effects of the program, the district staff has designed a comprehensive five-year study. Chapter 1 schools in the district were randomly designated as experimental or comparison schools after they had been paired off on the basis of school locale, school enrollment and grade span coverage. Six schools were designated as experimental schools. Another six served as comparison schools.

The longitudinal study uses entering students as cohorts, covering increasing numbers of student cohorts in each succeeding year. In the first year, the first cohort groups will be in the study. The second year will include two categories of cohorts--those receiving the treatment for the second year and those having their first exposure to the treatment. Progressively, each of the succeeding years will have the benefit of

additional cohorts. Thus, the design is particularly suited for examining the cumulative effects of he treatment.

Variables and Instruments

The dependent variables include reading achievement gains in normal curve equivalents (NCEs), reading attitudes and parent perceptions. The independent variables include nature of the family goals, grade level, and the treatment itself.

Reading achievement is measured by the Metropolitan Achievement Test (1978 edition), a standardized norm-referenced test. The other data are obtained through the family goal log, a reading activities inventory and a parent survey questionnaire. The inventory and questionnaire were adapted from existing survey instruments and field tested in the latter part of 1985 with small samples of students and parents. Both instruments were substantially revised and improved during the field test. The final versions of the instruments consisted of Likert-type scales and semantic differential scales.

Implementation

During the 1985-86 school year, the first year of the study, a norm-referenced model (Tallmadge and Wood, 1982) was used to assess the reading achievement gains of the experimental and comparison students. In a fall-to-spring testing cycle, a total of 365 experimental and 503 comparison students in grades one through six were tested in October and April. Their respective reading achievement gains were obtained in the NCE metric, separately for each grade. These students also completed the reading activities inventory in May 1986 to provide data on their attitudes toward reading. In addition, the parent survey questionnaire was administered to 396

parents in the experimental schools and 385 parents in the comparison schools in May 1986. Response rates for the parent survey were well over 90 percent for both experimental and comparison schools.

RESULTS

The "pairing" of experimental and comparison schools did not (nor was it intended to) achieve equivalency between the two groups. For example, there was evidently no relationship between school enrollment and Chapter 1 enrollment. Pairing schools on school enrollment did not necessarily provide pairs of comparable Chapter 1 enrollments. Also, in some instances, substantial differences existed between paired experimental and comparison schools with respect to pretest status as measured by NCE scores.

The non-equivalency, however, does not pose any serious threats to the validity of the study. This is because the validity of NCE gains depends essentially on the viability of the norm-referenced model. For both experimental and comparison groups, test norms, more than group equivalency, served as the appropriate controls. Tallmadge (1982) showed that the use of test norms as controls provides gain estimates that are as accurate as those derived from randomized control group models.

Student Achievement

At both experimental and comparison schools, the reading achievement gains were substantially higher than the national Chapter 1 averages. Consistent with the national trend, the lower grades showed higher gains. When the achievement data were analyzed separately for experimental and comparison

schools, the patterns generally favored the family goal schools. Tables 1 and 2 present a summary of the results.

Tables 1 and 2 about here

Parent Activities

The parent survey data revealed a rather interesting pattern of helping activities. Over two-thirds of the experimental school parents reported providing books in their homes or helping their children do their homework when necessary. Over one-half indicated that they kept themselves aware of their children's reading problems. Comparison school parents reported a highly similar pattern of activities, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 about here

Parent Perceptions

In both experimental and comparison samples, a majority of the parents indicated that there was improvement in their children's attitudes and school performance during the school year. In particular, over 80 percent of the parents reported improved attitudes towards reading. Almost two-thirds (64 %) of the experimental school parents felt that the Family Goal Program had contributed "a lot" or "quite a bit" to their children's achievement gains. See Tables 4 and 5.

Tables 4 and 5 about here

The parent survey data indicated that a majority of the parents (76 %) in the experimental schools felt that their experience with the Family Goal Program was a happy one. A lower percentage (65 %) described the experience as successful. Slightly over one-half (52 %) felt that program participation was easy. A predominant majority (91 %) would recommend the program to their friends who had children in Chapter 1.

Student Reading Activities

The student survey data revealed highly similar patterns of reading activities in experimental and comparison schools. Over one-half of the students indicated that they liked to read stories they chose, that they could find a book that was just right for them, and that they understood and remembered ideas better if the teacher explained the things that were important to remember. One-fifth or less of the students reported that most of the stories they read in school were too long or that many of the words in the stories they had to read were difficult. Table 6 presents a summary of the student survey data.

Table 6 about here

Relationships

Correlation coefficients were computed between student reading achievement gains and family goal activities. As shown in Table 7, all but one of the correlations were positive, as expected. Also, all but one were significant at or beyond the .05 level. In particular, setting aside a specific time for children to study each day correlated .850 with NCE gains. In addition, helping children do their homework also seemed to contribute to reading achievement ($r = .420$, $p < .01$). The negative correlation between being aware of children's reading problems and reading achievement was somewhat perplexing. Perhaps parents who engaged more in this activity were those with children who had a wider array of reading problems.

Table 7 about here

Correlation coefficients were also computed between student reading activities and reading achievement. Again, most of the correlations were significant at or beyong the .05 level (see Table 8). In particular, children who liked to talk about stories they had read tended to be high achievers ($r = .491$, $p < .01$). In addition, explaining things that are important to remember to children seemed conducive to high achievement ($r = .355$, $p < .01$). The negative influence of reading in "free" time ($r = -.259$, $p < .01$) and choosing stories to read ($r = -.262$, $p < .01$) perhaps raises, once again, the perennial issue of teacher directed instruction versus student choice. For many students, too much freedom might indeed be detrimental to educational progress.

Table 8 about here

DISCUSSION

The present study involved an easily transportable and affordable parent involvement component in compensatory education. The study, part of a larger five-year longitudinal investigation, used a quasi-experimental design to assess the effects of parent participation in the learning process. The achievement data generally favored the experimental schools, although the overall difference was not substantial. Perhaps this is to be expected since there was an amazingly high degree of similarity between the experimental and comparison parents with regard to their helping activities. In all instances, only a few percentage points separated the two groups in the proportion of parents engaging in the various helping activities. This, of course, is expected to change over time as new student cohorts enter the program and as current participants gain more exposure to the treatment.

The correlational data provided some useful information for program operation and improvement. The findings suggest that more guidance in parent activities might be beneficial. For example, setting aside a specific time for children to study each day is more likely than other activities to lead to achievement gains. Similarly, helping children do their homework tends to produce positive results. Program staff might "push" these more promising family goals a little harder than others. With regard to reading activities, teachers might encourage students to talk about the stories they have read. They might also adopt the practice of explaining to students things in a story

that are important to remember before assigning a reading activity.

Parent perception of their experience with the program provided perhaps the most telling point about the parent involvement effort. According to the parents, the program was more "happy" than it was "successful" and more "successful" than it was "easy." Nobody should expect an effective parent involvement effort to be a picnic.

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Table 1

NCE Gains of Experimental and Comparison Schools

	Experimental			Comparison		
School Pair	N	Pretest	Gain	N	Pretest	Gain
A	104	19.70	15.35	56	37.67	12.46
B	45	25.49	11.06	134	20.90	20.67
C	54	11.62	15.01	75	31.41	4.28
D	63	29.92	15.39	151	24.99	6.85
E	32	37.53	15.44	45	26.34	17.49
F	67	30.41	12.16	42	39.64	14.81
Total	365	24.51	14.20	503	27.61	12.39

Note: a. Data are for grades 1-6.

b. All means are weighted means.

c. National fall-spring reading gains for elementary grades typically hover around 5-10 NCEs.

d. NCE gains are achievement gains above and beyond what is considered "normal" growth.

Table 2

Summary of Grade-by-Grade Reading Achievement Results

Grade Level	Experimental/Comparison School Pair					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	+				-	-
2	+	-	+	+	-	-
3	-	+	-	+	-	-
4	+	-	+	+	+	+
5	-	+	+	+	+	+
6	+				+	-
Overall	+	0	+	+	0	-

Note: A plus sign indicates that achievement results favored the experimental school. A minus sign indicates otherwise. A zero indicates neutral results.

Table 3

Parent Activities in Experimental and Comparison Samples

Activity	Experimental (N = 396)	Comparison (N = 385)
I read to my child.	9.56	10.73
I encourage my child to read to me.	45.29	41.42
I visit the library with my child.	8.64	6.61
I provide books in my home.	75.98	78.16
I keep myself aware of my child's reading problems.	66.58	74.18
I provide a quiet place for my child to study.	55.27	57.77
I set aside a specific time for my child to study each day.	60.21	59.95
I help my child to do his/her homework when necessary.	75.52	75.93
I turn off the TV while my child is studying or reading.	45.19	47.48

Note: Figures in table are percentages of parents indicating that they engaged in the various activities on a regular basis.

Table 4

Parent Perception of Changes in Their Children

	Experimental (N = 396)			Comparison (N = 385)		
Area	+	0	-	+	0	-
Attitude towards school	73.06	24.61	2.33	74.03	24.42	1.56
Attitude towards reading	82.64	15.03	2.33	81.87	18.13	0.00
Attitude towards teachers	74.74	22.94	2.32	70.70	27.69	1.61
School grades in reading	72.99	21.39	5.61	77.84	20.54	1.62
Other school grades	65.43	27.66	6.91	65.94	27.25	6.81

Note: + = Better; 0 = No change; - = Worse.

Figures in table are percentages of parent responses.

Table 5

Parent Perception of Program Impact (N = 396)

Impact	Percent
A lot	35.61
Quite a bit	28.53
Some	22.98
Not much	3.78
Not able to judge	9.11

Table 6

Results of Student Reading Activities Survey

Activity	Experimental (N = 365)	Comparison (N = 503)
I read everyday.	29.72	34.63
I like to read just about everything.	31.83	23.09
Most of the stories I read in school are too long.	17.06	19.89
Many of the words in stories I have to read are difficult.	20.05	16.17
I like to read in my free time.	42.48	32.40
I like to talk about stories I have read.	36.05	29.52
Reading is my favorite subject in school.	44.06	33.33
I like to read stories that I choose.	55.64	61.85
I can find a book that is just right for me.	59.24	51.59
I understand stories better if I hear them read.	42.03	38.89
I understand and remember ideas better if the teacher explains the things that are important to remember.	59.34	53.58

Note: Figures in table are percentages of students indicating that the various activities occurred on a regular basis.

Table 7

Correlations between NCE Gains and Family Goal Activities

(N = 781)

Activity	r
I read to my child.	.235*
I encourage my child to read to me.	.230*
I visit the library with my child.	.289**
I provide books in my home.	.268**
I keep myself aware of my child's reading problems.	-.215*
I provide a quiet place for my child to study.	.303**
I set aside a specific time for my child to study each day.	.850**
I help my child to do his/her homework when necessary.	.420**
I turn off the TV while my child is studying or reading.	.119

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 8

Correlations between NCE Gains and Student Reading Activities

(N = 868)

Activity	r
I read everyday.	.113
I like to read just about everything.	-.029
Most of the stories I read in school are too long.	-.016
Many of the words in stories I have to read are difficult.	-.321**
I like to read in my free time.	-.259**
I like to talk about stories I have read.	.491**
Reading is my favorite subject in school.	.296**
I like to read stories that I choose.	-.262**
I can find a book that is just right for me.	-.059
I understand stories better if I hear them read.	.204*
I understand and remember ideas better if the teacher explains the things that are important to remember.	.335**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$